

Book Review:

W.B. Worthen.

Drama: Between Poetry and Performance.

United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016.

This brilliantly written book uses Kenneth Burke's thought to conceive an original critical frame that allow us to deal with drama as both text and performed work. The book teaches how to *read* drama and explores the perennial issues of theatre: language, plot, character, role and the reciprocity of drama as archive, repertoire and restorative performance.

The study of drama in universities has been a record of unresolved issues. I recall early attempts to use Burkean methods and insights as a graduate student at the University of Minnesota. David Thompson and Virginia Fredericks used Dramatism as the central method in their Performance Studies (then called Oral Interpretation) classes. David Thompson (often called "The Duke by his students) had a strong classical education and was a firm believer in the integrity and wholeness of the text. Yet he often acknowledged the tension between the New Criticism and what he called "Burke's Sociological approach.

"I tell you about the dignity of the text and the authority of the author, but Burke examines the text by shoving it from one lens to another, ignores generic convention and sometimes reduce the text to a bat squeak of its milieu. I tell my students to trust the author, but Burkean methods undermine that trust, said Thompson in a lecture about the relationship of writing to staging a play. He noted that rather than serving the text or restoring it to some state of performative purity, for Kenneth Burke the text and the theatre are agencies for the presentation of ideas and issues.

And in this sense, Worthen's book is very Burkean. Permit me to quote a representative passage:

Many of the critical innovations in modern dramatic performance have arisen from efforts to restore "original practices, or a modern imagination of them, against the overwhelming domination of the scenic realism of

the nineteenth century stage: discovering the vitality of the orchestra as a *dancing place* and the cinematic flexibility of the Shakespearean empty platform, and so on. But Brecht's work is critical in another regard, asserting the theatre not as the site for the representation of a fictive narrative, the recitation of characters, which make speeches, but a scene of action defined . . . as part of the larger world surround the stage. (Worthen, 213)

No one has ever written more lucidly about the relationship between writing and performance. Worthen has much to say to teachers of writing, dramatists, theatre goers, art historians and rhetoricians—especially Burkean rhetoricians. The book bristles with ideas. After reading the second chapter I built an exercise for students called “building character from scraps by putting back the subtext. It was wholly inspired by Worthen. He has five worthwhile suggestions where other theorists might give you one. I understand that several other persons are going to review this work and I will leave most of the deep exploration to them.

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